DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 383 CS 209 249

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TITLE The Practical Antiquarian.
PUB DATE 17 Dec 84
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bibliographies; European History; Higher Education; *Literary History; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Victorian Literature; Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS *Browning (Robert); Ring and the Book (The)

ABSTRACT

Intended for college teachers and students of English literature and bibliography, this paper presents a chronology of Victorian poet Robert Browning's life as he wrote the four-volume "murder poem," "The Ring and the Book." The paper begins with Browning's discovery in a Florentine bookstall of "the old yellow book," a collection of pamphlets detailing a famous Roman murder trial from 150 years earlier. The paper then details the personal and professional obstacles Browning encountered until the publication nine years later of the final two volumes of the poem that the "old yellow book" inspired. The paper includes a list of the 18 pamphlets in the "old yellow book," and the publisher's production notes. (HTH)

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# The Practical Antiquarian

by Hope Bussey McKenzie

To the Teacher of a Beginning Course in Bibliography--College Level

The following paper, with its use of technical language and bibliographical description, provides the student with a concrete example of how one writes about a book at various stages of its publication. The "story" itself is interesting for its biographical details of Robert Browning's life during the time of writing and publication of The Ring and the Book.

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Hope Bussey McKenzie

17 December 1984

The Practical Antiquarian

In June of 1860, Robert Browning found "the old yellow book" in a bookstall in Florence. In February of 1869, Smith, Elder and Company of London published Volumes III and IV of The Ring and the Book. What came between these two dates is a gruelling, uneven, off-again-on-again progress, through anxiety and grief, rushes of inspiration and rather surprising commercialism. It is, however, the story of most large works; life does not stand still even for a great poet. In such a story, the antiquarian, the psychologist, the "literarian," the bibliophile, the bibliographer, and the philosopher of almost any persuasion can find something to engage his interest. Yet it is not the old book itself but what was done with it that brings together such diverse points of view and gives them focus.

"The old yellow book" is actually a collection of eighteen pamphlets, bound into one volume measuring 7.75 x 10 x 1 inch, detailing a famous Roman murder trial of December 1698. Included between "the soiled, worm-eaten 'crumpled vellum covers'" were a title page, a table of contents, three letters pertinent to the case and telling of

the execution of "G. Franceschini," and "a transcript of the Sentence of the Criminal court of Florence in the case against . . . Francesca Pompillia Comparini, wife of Guido Franceschini." Sixteen of the pamphlets are "official documents (arguments and summaries of evidence, mostly in Latin)." They bear the imprint of the official papal press, "Romæ typis R. Camp. apost. 1698." The other two pamphlets are not official and are unsigned, but presumed to be by the lawyers in the case.[1]

Specifically, the volume contains the following oddly numbered pamphlets:

#1 - The attorney Arcangelo's defense of Guido Franceschini, the murderer

#2 - The attorney Spreti's defense of Guido and his associates

#3 - Arcangeli's defense of the associates

#5 - The attorney Gambi's prosecution arguments for the Fisc

#6 - The attorney Bottini's reply to #1 and #2 for the Fisc

#4 - The summary for the Fisc, including depositions by Tortelli, Angelica, Pompillia, and Celestino Angelo

#14 - Response of Bottini against Guido and others, including a reply to Spreti in #2

#8 - Arcangeli's reply to Bottini in #6 and #14

#7 - Summary of defense for Guido

#11 - Summary of the Fisc, including Pompillia's letters, Pietro Camparini's will, etc.

#16 - Spreti's closing arguments[2]

All of these pamphlets are in Latin, but two others are in Italian: #10--an appeal by the defense for public sympathy; #15--a reply and equally earnest appeal by the prosecution on behalf of the Fisc. In spite of the inclusion of these appeals to the public, the pamphlets were not intended for street sale, as was often the case in other sensational trials, but they were each hastily written overnight during the trial for distribution to lawyers and officials.[3]

Another account of the trial surfaced in London while Browning was writing on the poem and was sent to him by John Simeon, as noted in the Philobiblion Society Miscellanies, xii, 1868-69. Browning used "almost every scrap" of the interesting additional information found in this last pamphlet. In Hodell's The Old Yellow Book in the Everyman's Library Series, the translation of this secondary source is printed with each addition to the original information in italics.[4] A third source, evidently printed much later than the first, never made its way to Browning, but shows the twentieth-century reader how close Browning came to guessing accurately about some of the facts in the poem which did not appear in the material he used.[5] Indeed, Hood believes that somehow the source did reach Browning, though it is not acknowledged.[6]

It is all very well to catalogue the contents of the poet's sources. But these are only the bare bones of the matter. Browning himself said that when he went out that June day in 1860 to browse among the market stalls in Florence, he was "pushed by the hand ever above my shoulder." In the poem, this remark became " . . . a Hand/always above my shoulder, pushed me once,/. . .and 'Stall!' cried I: a lira made it mi[illegible]."[7] Hodell adds that Browning started reading the book as he walked home and continued to study the pages "until by nightfall he had so mastered the facts of the case that the whole tragedy lay plain before his mind's eye."[8]

To see a matter plain in this way is not, however, to get it down on paper. Illness, travel, the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on 29 June 1861, moving back to London after so many years in Italy, proofing a collected edition (the so-called "third"), bringing to publication Dramatis Personæ in May of 1864, making a tentative start on The Ring and the Book in autumn of that year, the death of Browning's father in 1866,[9] and in the midst of all that, shepherding Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning through the perils of adolescence and into Oxford[10]--these were the obstacles that have nothing to do with reading background, writing, and publishing a major work.

In spite of everything, in the summer of 1864, on holiday in the Pyrenees, Browning began to see exactly how his "great venture, the murder-poem" could be organized.[11] By November 1,

1865, he had produced 15,000 lines, but his work was often stopped or slowed to a snail's pace so that it was the spring of 1868 before the poem was finished.[12]

Meantime, in 1867, Browning was having ups and downs in his relationship with an American publisher. In 1849, Ticknor, Reed and Fields had republished the (then) complete poems of Robert Browning. James T. Fields, at that time the junior partner, had made a very favorable impression on the Brownings; and now eighteen years later, Browning was delighted to have his proposal for an American edition accepted by Fields, Osgood and Co. But when they tried to impose all sorts of restrictions and then offered him £50 for his book, he indignantly broke off the negotiations and even threatened to get another American publisher.[13] The threat was almost carried out in 1870, when he wrote a query to an unknown publisher.[14] The disagreement was finally resolved by the personable Mr. Fields,[15] and The Ring and the Book was duly published by Fields, Osgood and Company of Boston in 1869.[16]

Returning to London, the story resumes with a much smoother relationship going forward with Smith, Elder and Company. George Murray Smith had as usual refrained from even asking to read The Ring and the Book until the corrected proofs were done, leading Browning to call such restraint a virtue in a sympathetic publisher.[17] Besides, Smith, Elder and Company had paid Browning £1250 for "the right of

publication for five years,"--the most Browning had ever received for a work.[18]

The following entry in Broughton's bibliography of Browning's works, 1830-1950, while it seems a rather dry account of a momentous event, is nevertheless an important record for the bibliographer, providing at the same time some interesting side-lights for the non-professional bibliophile.

The Ring and the Book, 1868-9

A73] THE / RING AND THE BOOK./ BY / ROBERT BROWNING,/ M.A.,/ HONORARY FELLOW OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD./ IN FOUR VOLUMES./ VOL. I. [-IV]/ SMITH, ELDER AND CO., LONDON. 1868 [for vols. I-II, 1869 for vols. III-IV]./ <The Right of Translation is reserved>

Collation: 17 x 10.7 cm.; vol. i: $A^2$ B-$Q^8$ $R^4$; 126 leaves; pp. [4] 1 2-155 156 157-245 246-48; $ 1 (-A) signed. Vol. ii: $A^2$ B-$Q^8$ $R^6$; 128 leaves; pp. [4] 1 2-251 252; $ 1 (-A) signed. Vol. iii: $A^2$ B-$Q^4$ $R^6$; 128 leaves; pp.[4] 1 2-249 250-52; $ 1 (-A) signed. Vol. iv: $A^2$ B-$P^8$ $Q^6$; 120 leaves; pp. [4] 1 2-195 196 197-235 236; $ 1 (-A) signed.

Vol. i: $A1^2$ TP as above, verso blank; $A2^a$ "CONTENTS." verso blank; 1-245 text, RTs "THE RING AND THE BOOK" verso, for individual parts recto; 246 imprint: "LONDON:/ PRINTED BY SMITH, ELDER AND CO.,/ OLD BAILEY, E.C."; 247 adv. for "THE POETICAL WORKS" of R.B.; 248 blank.

Vol. ii: same to 251, where text ends; imprint 252. Vol. iii: same to 249, where text ends: 250 imprint; 251-52 blank, Vol. iv: same to 235, where text ends; 236 imprint.

Forest green beveled cloth boards, fancy triple rule stamped in black around covers front and rear. Design of boxes and rules in black on spine, gilt lettering "THE / RING / AND THE / BOOK / ROBERT / BROWNING./ [gilt rule] / VOL. I [-IV]/ SMITH, ELDER & Co." Variant bindings are stamped I, 2, III, 4: for explanation see Carter, Binding Variants, p. 99.

Vol i pub. Nov. 21, 1868; ii, Dec. 26; iii, Jan. 30, 1869; iv, Feb. 27. The price per vol. was seven shillings sixpence. Probably there were 2500 copies. The MS remained for many years in the hands of Mrs. George Murray Smith but is now in the British Museum. Some MS holdings are also in the Balliol College Library.

Browning overhauled the text carefully for the ed. of 1872, but most of his changes affected only isolated words and punctuation. Some lines were changed radically and the final version had increased over the earlier one by 18 lines, 9 of which were in Bk VIII. Such changes promote clearness generally. For the standard account of the text see Appendix XI of A.K. Cook's Commentary, London, 1920. There are

special bibliographies of The Ring and the Book in Cook, op. cit., and in Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clark, eds., Camberwell Ed. of the Complete Works, New York, 1898, vi. xxxvii-xl.

A74] ____. 2nd Ed. London, Smith and Elder, 1872.

Some copies sold as the "second edition" are made up in part of sheets belonging to the first ed. A few use 1st ed. TP's of vol. i, still dated 1868.

A75] The Ring and the Book./ By / Robert Browning, M.A./ Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford./ In Two Volumes./ Vol. I./ Boston:/ Fields, Osgood, & Company.,/ Successors to Ticknor and Fields,/ 1869.

18 cm., i. pp. 329; ii, pp. 332. Repr. in 1870. Again in 1872 under the imprint James R. Osgood and company, Late Ticknor & Fields, and Fields, Osgood, & Co.

But, when The Ring and the Book was next printed in Boston, the firm had become Houghton, Mifflin and Company with offices in New York and Cambridge (The Riverside Press), and the date was 1883.[19]

Such persevering effort should be rewarded by universal applause. The Ring and the Book had its share of approbation, mixed generously with reproach. Among those who

have supplied material for this paper, John Marshall Gest sounds the only seriously dissenting note. He complains about the critics who admire the work and the poet himself --Birrell, Stopford Brooke, Marzials, A.K. Cook (who was mildly critical but faint-hearted enough to find that "the speeches display brilliant wit and keen analysis"), Sir Frederick Treves (Country of The Ring and the Book), and Hodell (whom Gest speaks of almost with awe). Gest waxes indignant at Browning's insensitive portrayal of the lawyers.[20] But the Æthenaeum, after having often broken Browning's heart with faint praise or outright sarcasm, suddenly lost its collective heart to The Ring and the Book, calling it "the supremest poetical achievement of our time . . . the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare."[21]

The Old Yellow Book itself is now in the College Library at Balliol, Robert Browning's Alma Mater. He had long before his death promised it to that institution, and Robert W.B. Browning carried out his father's wish.[22] At Balliol, it could have been just another antique among many. Browning himself could have been like many another antiquarian, collecting, cataloguing, bequeathing, and leaving a mildly interesting artifact of fifteenth-century life to a marveling posterity--marveling for a moment and in a moment forgetting the object of their wonder. But

Browning was a practical antiquarian.

Hodell sums up, from his late-Victorian viewpoint, the significance of all the monumental toil and thought which Browning poured into the four volumes with their 21,000 lines and thousands upon thousands of words:

> . . . the chance-found Old Yellow Book at last occasioned the most profound utterance Robert Browning was to give to the world in all that concerns the human heart and its motives as they play the drama of the world before the eye of the Almighty.[23]

Notes

[1]"The Old Yellow Book." The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Inprints: A Cumulative Author List Representing Library of Congress Printed Cards and Titles Reported by Other American Libraries (London, 1968-) 429: col, 1, 233.

[2]John Marshall Gest, trans. and ed., The Old Yellow Book (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1927) 28-34.

[3]Charles W. Hodell, trans. and ed. The Old Yellow Book, Being a Supplementary Volume to The Ring and the Book, Everyman's Library Series, No. 503 (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1927) xii.

[4]Hodell 258.

[5]William O. Raymond, "Browning's 'Roman Murder Story' as Recounted in a Hitherto Unknown Italian Manuscript Contemporary Account," in Browning's "Roman Murder Story," A.J. Armstrong, ed. Baylor University's Browning Interests Series 11, XLII, no. 4 (Waco: Baylor University Press, December 1939) 13-20.

[6]Thurman L. Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning, Collected by Thomas Wise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933) 351 note 1.

[7]Richard D. Altick, Robert Browning: The Ring and the Book. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) 8, 24(Bk I, ll. 40-41; 25(l. 83).

[8]Hodell ix.

[9]Altick 8.

[10]Hood 109.

[11]Hood 90.

[12]Altick 12.

[13]William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker, eds., New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950) 184 note 2.

[14]DeVane 195.

[15]DeVane 184 note 2.

[16]Leslie Nathan Broughton et al., Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1830-1950 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953) 15.

[17]Hood 226.

[18]DeVane 184 note 2.

[19]Broughton 15.

[20]Gest 45-46.

[21]Altick 14.

[22]Hodell Publisher's note n.p.

[23]Hodell xvi.

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Used in Kidd-Key College Alumna Browning Study Group by my mother in 1922 at Sherman, Texas.